

## A Black Odyssey

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*A Black Odyssey*, by Randall Bennett Woods. Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981. pp. 254. Illustrations, index, bibliography. \$20.00.

Naive, idealistic, and strongly determined, John Lewis Waller braved America's stormy racial scene. He tried with great patience to carve a world free of constraints on black enterprise and political activity. Despite one racial roadblock after another, Waller persevered with unimpeachable optimism. *A Black Odyssey* chronicles the quest by one extraordinary black man striving to achieve virtually impossible goals for any American Negro during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This is a story whose ending is sadly predictable; yet it is of special interest because it illuminates the tragedy of a whole race through the personal tragedy of one man.

The book describes Waller's attempt to create three different frontier communities for Negroes so that they could develop and prosper along with whites. Born a slave in Missouri, Waller moved to Iowa as a child, lived in Tama County, and studied law in Cedar Rapids. The young attorney was one of the first Negroes to participate in the 1870s Great Exodus into frontier Kansas where he tried to steer his brethren toward equal co-existence with whites in economic terms. This goal was to be attained with only minimal help from whites, and practically no social interaction—a relationship referred to by whites as "parallel development." Following a series of discouraging failures in Kansas partisan politics, Waller secured an appointment during the Benjamin Harrison administration in 1891 as minister to the island nation of Madagascar. While serving there, Waller began pursuing a dream to establish a Negro colony by means of a land concession. Like his goal in Kansas, he encouraged American Negroes to settle on this east Africa island and create a thriving agricultural and industrial community.

Initially, Waller's dream appeared certain. But shortly after he secured a giant land concession as an ex-minister, he became a pawn of French imperialism. The project abruptly disintegrated in the wake of aggressive colonization maneuvers on the part of the French whom Waller had rivaled as minister to the local government which the French had since overthrown. Bruised by this setback, he returned to the United States after a harrowing stint in a French prison.

A few years later, Waller championed another "idealized frontier," this time in the sugar fields of Cuba. Following the Spanish-American War, which found Waller a participant in an all-black Kansas troop, he unsuccessfully petitioned the State Department to allow

him to build a haven for Negro self-development. After this last disillusioning rejection, Waller died a bitter idealist, a lifelong victim of bigotry and ill fortune.

Author Randall Woods, whose past scholarship has focused on diplomatic history, informs his readers that the book's intent is to focus on Waller's career, rather than to inquire into race relations at the turn of the century. This is one of the few disappointments of the book, for Woods provides deft analysis in places: his description of the effect of racism on United States diplomatic motives is a case in point. Woods also has a keen sense of irony and is able judiciously to fit events in Waller's life into general historical patterns. More insights and interpretations could have made the book more important than it already is. Aided by good source material and a relatively unscathed topic, the book could have become a rich, provocative work, especially concerning black leadership in the Midwest.

Nonetheless, *A Black Odyssey* is a solid work of scholarship. It adds to the small body of historical works concerning the American Negro. Woods's work should contribute to the elaboration of a more definitive and focused view of Negro leadership and black/white relations at the turn of the century. Its statement reaches far beyond the Kansas prairie borders.

IOWA STATE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT

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*Shucks, Shocks, and Hominy Blocks: Corn as a Way of Life in Pioneer America*, by Nicholas P. Hardeman. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981. pp. xxi, 271. Drawings, bibliography, index. \$20.00.

The author, professor of history at California State University at Long Beach, offers a nostalgic though interesting book about the production and uses of corn in the days before "America was devoid of its once-large class of self-reliant small farmers and farm families" (p. 248). Hardeman is interested in the "truer meaning of [raising] corn as a way of life" (p. 249). The author spent twenty years on "a rather primitive Ozark corn farm" and has done research on the history of his family on the nineteenth-century frontier. He is clearly steeped in the evidence for the significance of corn to pioneer America as well as the twentieth century. Because of the significance of corn to the economy, this is a book of interest to many academics as well as non-academics in the Middle West.

The work is divided into eighteen chapters—each focused on

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